



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Homily for School Mass

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In today's first reading, the leaders of the people came to the old prophet Samuel and demanded a king, a king like the other nations had. They were thinking in terms of a military leader who would bring them victory over their enemies and the neighboring tribes who were harassing them. When Samuel prayed to God he was told: "... it is not you they have rejected; they have rejected me from ruling over them." The Israelites had abandoned God and wanted to determine their own rule and dominate the other nations.

There is a parallel between this world of the Israelites and our world today. We need to consider the extent to which our world has rejected God and tried to replace him. In a recent essay with the title *Europe and its Discontents* Pope Benedict XVI discusses the development of European culture and its contemporary decline. He writes: "The victory of the post-European techno-secular world and the universalization of its lifestyle and thinking have spread the impression (especially in Asia and Africa) that Europe's value system, culture and faith - in other words the very foundation of its identity - have reached the end of the road and have indeed already disappeared ... its sustaining spiritual forces have collapsed." The Pope continues: "Europe is infected by a strange lack of desire for the future. Children, our future, are perceived as a threat to the present, as though they were taking something away from our lives. Children are seen - at least by some people - as a liability rather than a source of hope." He rightly compares today's situation with the decline of the Roman Empire. He quotes Arnold Toynbee who emphasized the difference between technological-material progress and true progress which he defined as spiritualization. In the middle of the last century Toynbee recognized that the Western world was indeed undergoing a crisis, which he attributed to the abandonment of religion for the cult of technology, nationalism and militarism. For him this crisis had a name: secularism. To save European culture, he said that the religious heritage in all its forms would have to be reintroduced, especially the heritage of Western Christianity.

The Pope notes that the United States of America has the potential for a special religious mission toward the rest of the world. But, lest we become complacent that we are not Europe, he points out that "in the United States, too, the Christian heritage is decaying at an incessant pace."

My thinking has strayed some distance from Samuel and the Israelites demand for a king. But there is a parallel between their rejection of God, coupled with their desire for their own type of secular military leadership, and the situation of our world today. Can we learn the lessons of history or are we destined to slide



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down the slope of decline and irrelevance into oblivion like the Roman Empire?

The Pope, writing from the perspective of a European, says: "Unless we embrace our own heritage of the sacred, we will not only deny the identity of Europe but will also fail in providing a service to others to which they are entitled. To the other cultures of the world, there is something deeply alien about the absolute secularism that is developing in the West. They are convinced that a world without God has no future." Toynbee believed that the fate of a society always depends on its creative minorities. Christian believers should look upon themselves as just such a creative minority, helping the Western world to reclaim what is best in its heritage and thereby place itself in the service of all humankind. That is the challenge which we face today. Whether and how we meet it will be just as big a turning point in our history as the Israelites demand for a king was a turning point in their political and religious history.